

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, September 2, 1971

A House That Was Born In Trouble

(The following is an article which appeared in the Winter edition of The Bulletin "Old Time New England," of The Society for The Preservation of New England Antiquities.)

"A House That Was Born in trouble" By Gershom Bradford.

The brig "Mercury" sailed from Boston on October 28, 1807. She was bound for Alicante, Spain. Her master, Gershom Bradford, was thirty-three years old, had a wife and two little girls that were left in Dorchester. Recently, from his father, he had inherited a piece of land in his native Duxbury. Before sailing he had entered into a loose agreement with a carpenter, Benjamin Bird, to build a house on this land while he was away. The prospect looked bright despite the troubled times. When forty-eight days out the Captain wrote in his journal, "Last night was at work about our intended house at Duxbury."

On the twenty-eighth of December the brig was in the hostile Strait of Gibraltar. Two days later while beating near the "Rock" she spoke with the ship "Meiberna," Malta for Calcutta, who confirmed the report of war with Algiers and several vessels taken. False though it

was, the news added to the concern. The seas could not be considered safe even for the "Mercury," a peaceful merchantman, carrying no guns, for she had already been fired upon by two Spanish gunboats.

At that time there was no war with England, France or Spain. The Barbary pirates had been quitted by our Comodore Preble and Captain Decatur, but they were still restive and not trusted by shipmasters sailing in adjacent waters. They referred to them with apprehension as the Algerines.

A letter written by Captain Bradford to his wife, dated at Gibraltar December 31, 1807, tells us what happened there.

Incidentally, this letter was placed in the care of Captain Foster of the brig "Pallina," who mailed it at Baltimore on February 18. It was simply addresses to Mrs. Sarah B. Bradford, Boston, Mass., yet it reached her hand upon paying the postage of 23 cents.

"Dear Sarah:

You will see by this that we have had a long passage from Boston, as we have now this day arrived at this port. But not of our own will for we were captured and brought in by the English. Taken again so soon.

But I hope not to be made a prize of, or that is, not in this place now. But in all probability could, as the times are here present, and shall be before I get out of the Straights again. For what the British do not take the Spanish will and I suppose that before this reaches you you will hear of the Algerines being at war with America, too, which would be worse than all the rest. But that is made up again. They took several vessels, but they are all released again. I have not heard anything of Gam yet (his brother in those seas) Hope I shall when I get farther up-if I get clear of this place....

How comes the house? Not quite finished yet I suppose. When it is I do not know how it will be paid for. I am almost discouraged at the prospect now before me. When I came away I thought it very good. But the laws of England and France are such now, that we cannot go to either one port or another without being made a prize of. But I hope for the best...."

After being held for eight days during which the "Mercury's" papers were taken and examined. They were returned and the Captain allowed to sail. He worked up the East coast of Spain a-

gainst persistent head winds. On January 17 he was halted by the H.M. cruiser "Remedy." Captain Bradford went aboard her with his papers, was given a glass of wine and allowed to proceed with wishes for a pleasant passage. Again on January 31 he was boarded from a French privateer, treated politely and allowed to go on.

Yet on February 3 the Captain wrote in his journal:

"This is my birthday and rather unfortunate on some accounts, for after beating the ocean for 98 days, tedious and anxious, and then having your port in view, to be captured and our vessel taken possession of by a stranger appears at first thought as something hard, (which, it is interjected, can be set down as a remarkable restraint of language.)

But so it is with us of the "Mercury." This morning, being about 2 1/2 leagues distant from this port we were taken and brought in by the French privateer "Josephine," Captain Joseph Bonaventure. Papers, log book etc., taken on shore and myself went through an examination."

While these disconcerting events were taking place the house

(Continued on Page 11)

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, September 2, 1971

A HOUSE

(Continued from Page 10)

in Duxbury was in the course of construction. We learn more details of the affair at Alicante by a letter written on February 14 to Dear Sarah:

"Until now it has always been a pleasure to write my lovely wife, but at present it is otherwise as I have only to recount hard misfortune and still am in perfect health which is the greatest blessing. Therefore, I suppose that I should not murmur. When treated thus by mankind who can be silent? Such is the case with your poor but constant friend. After a tedious passage of 98 days from Boston and many a sleepless one, we had this port in view, hoping in a few hours to be at anchor and somewhat end my anxiety by being in a friendly port. Just then a new scene appeared for a French privateer came out of the harbor, took possession of my vessel, took her to the mooring place, stripped her of her rigging and sails, unshipped the rudder, put 15 men aboard armed with cutlasses and muskets, for fear we should run away with her. Now they are (and have been since we arrived which was the 3rd of February) taking out the cargo and not one day passes,

but there is more or less fighting on board, either with our crew or among themselves, so that my mate now has his head bound up from the cuts and bruises he received 3 nights gone. Last night was the first since leaving Boston that I have taken off my clothes to sleep. As our quarantine was for 40 days only ten of them are passed, we have of course 30 more to remain on board and so must make the best of it, which is not the most comfortable. When the quarantine is out I suppose I must look for other quarters as we shall not be permitted to remain on board, whether we would or not. I expect that I shall remain in Alicante for three or four months as it will be that time before the business is concluded.... I shall hope to be protected and returned to my friends in safety by the Providence wherein I always trust....

But what will my poor Sarah do and my little Maria and Lucia? I hope that you will not suffer. My hopes are, at present, cut short of obtaining something more than the necessities of life. I shall hope to protect you from want. Enough of that. Now I will try and devise some way for you to pay for the house as I suppose it is going on with and of course must

be paid for. If any money should come safe from Leghorn (Italy) . I think you will be able to do it, as I proposed before I came away with the addition of what will be our share of the place....(his father's estate). If you should be in need of more, before I come home, you will take it from Gam (his brother) or sell the insurance shares as you think best.

Sally, it appears to me now that it would be better to have the woodshed go the other way than what we proposed. If it isn't too late when this reaches you. Do as you think proper concerning it and do as you think best in everything."

An invoice, dated at Boston two days before the brig sailed, shows the nature and value of the cargo taken by the French privateer. It was shipped in the "Mercury" by Robert Roberts of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and was consigned to the master for sale at Alicante:

3281 Quintals dry	
cod fish, American caught and cured	\$14,764.00
41 tierces salmon	
Ditto	\$838.00
22 barrels No. 2	
beef	\$220.00
399 kegs First	
quality butter	\$1,630.75
207 kegs second	

Ditto	\$1,098.30
167 cheese loose in casks	\$367.68
30 boxes Brown Havana sugar	\$1,086.71
Charges that included trucking, laborers, cooperage of salmon, sugars and beef and insurance at 8 %	\$2,567.61
	<hr/> \$22,573.05

Dated and signed by Robert Roberts on Oct 26, 1807

In another letter dated March 25, 1808 at Alicante the Captain assures his wife and daughters of his continued good health.... "otherwise I have nothing but adverse fortune. Therefore it gives me but little satisfaction to write you...When I wrote last I was in quarantine. Since that we were admitted to pratique which is 15 days gone. ("Admitted to pratique" means that he was officially freed from quarantine.) Since that I have remained on shore for as the Frenchmen have taken possession of the vessel and robbed almost everything belonging to her and also my spy glass, quadrant and all my charts. My clothes I was allowed to take with me. I am very kindly entertained by Rosett in his home and family. I think it most likely I shall remain for 2 or 3 months and business will be concluded.

Indeed we can not tell what to think of it...

I have heard from Gam and that he is doing very well. I hope that he will be in Boston before this is. Our cousin Charles B. is here, same as myself, by the French.

I will tell you, my dear Sarah, how I spend my time (for I want to tell you everything.) Get up at 8 O'C have tea for breakfast and sup at ten and in the intermediate time I try to divert myself in walking or reading, but often sit down in my room and think of home and you...By the vessel that this comes by I send a few figs which I hope you will get and that they will make Maria remember father and may heaven protect you all and may you be happy is the prayer of

Yours,
Gershom Bradford."

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, September 2, 1971

The brig was returned to the Captain's possession on June 12 and he began to load salt. While this work was going on an entry in the log showed the apprehension always present with the shipmasters in those days and waters: "Two Algerine cruisers came into port today," and the relief two days later, "The two Algerines went to sea."

June 28, 1808 was the long-anticipated sailing day. The cargo, beside the salt, was brandy, almonds and licorice root and was all stowed, the vessel fitted out and two families of passengers for Gibraltar aboard. That day the Captain received a bill from the American Consul, Robert Montgomery, in which was the item: "Paid Assessor of War for liberating your vessel... \$150.00." It would be interesting to know more about this singular item charged in a "friendly" port.

After a run down the East coast of Spain in pleasant weather the passengers were put ashore at Gibraltar. The brig sailed for home on July 11. They made a good passage sighting Cape Cod on August 20, took a pilot at midnight and at 4 A.M., anchored in Quarantine, Boston Harbor—3,584 miles, 40 days.

The family moved into the new house in April 1809 and in it lived and ended their long

lives. The Captain retired about 1828, enjoying sixteen years-well-earned after some thirty-five years of rugged seafaring. His relaxed years were spent with his books, cows, garden, gunning and civic activities.

Captain Bonaventure of the "Josephine" did not observe the "Brotherhood of the Sea" when he took from a fellow mariner such vital personal property as his quadrant, spyglass and charts. Yet later he must have had a prick of conscience and returned them, for the writer has the quadrant in his possession, a gift from a cousin who had inherited it. It bears the Captain's name and the date of purchase, 1796, on an ivory inset. The spyglass unhappily disappeared in the spring of 1968 when thieves made themselves at home in the house.

When the last of the Captain's daughters died in 1894, Laurence Bradford, a grandson and sailor in his youth, took possession of the homestead. In 1931, when their mother passed away, Laurence's sons, Gershom and Edward, took title to the property.

Recently at the bottom of a chest, among other papers, was found the settlement account with Benjamin Bird for the construction of the house. The first estimated cost was \$2000, extras, such as stable, blinds, etc., brought the total to \$2,344.11. Should that sum now seem incredible for an eight-room house with hand-made mouldings, we are shown that a carpenter working on the extras received a little more than a dollar a day. We further learned from this account how the Captain met the cost that had so worried him at Alicante-Mr. Bird accepted his note for \$1,000. At least the problem was postponed until a later more prosperous voyage.

In August 9, 1968 the brothers deeded the house, contents and ten acres to the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society Inc. The object of the transfer being to preserve the place as an example of a shipmaster's home, almost as he left it, furnishings, papers and all—a house built in the early days of sail, when what a sea captain managed to acquire was accomplished without the benefit of the "Freedom of the Seas."